



Capturing the Past, Inspiring the Future

# Andy Ayim

Interviewed by

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*Welcome to the Archives of Information Technology. It's the 17<sup>th</sup> of July 2019, and we're in the offices of the Worshipful Company of Information Technologists in Smithfield, London. I'm Ian Symonds, and I've been working in information technology and management consultancy since 1976, a period of enormous change in the industry.*

[00:22]

*Today I'm talking to Andy Ayim. Andy moves in the world of venture capital, tech start-ups, and product development. He is currently Managing Director of the London Accelerator at Backstage Capital, that looks for investment opportunities with companies founded by those from under-represented groups, including women, people of colour, and the LGBT community. In 2018 Andy was named in the Financial Times as one of the top ten most influential black and minority ethnic tech leaders in the UK. We'll be talking about Andy's background, influences, and some key events that shaped his career to date, and his views on the industry today.*

[01:08]

*So Andy, where and when you born?*

So, firstly, it's an honour to be here, and I'm really super pumped and excited to have this conversation, and to have Ian, who comes with such wisdom and, and years of experience beyond when I was even born. So I was born in 1988, raised and, and grew up in Tottenham, north London, initially, and only recently actually, we moved out of Tottenham, in, in the last few years, to Essex. So I live around Epping. And I have a lovely fiancée that I live with, and a two-year-old daughter, who's full of joy and keeps me very active every day.

[01:48]

*OK. And, your family background is Kenyan, is that right?*

No, Ghanaian.

*Ghanaian.*

Ghanaian.

*Sorry, I got that wrong.*

So, my parents originated from Ghana. My mum actually still lives in Ghana, and she operates a nursery out there. My father sadly passed away some years ago. But, we originated from Ghana, and, lived a very Ghanaian-influenced life here in London actually, because, in Tottenham, it's quite a known point in terms of like, multiculturalism, and Ghana is one of the more prominent nations that are present. So there's a lot of Ghanaians in Tottenham, which means, if we go to our local shops, we're getting Ghanaian food, such as yams and plantains. It also means that a lot of, a lot of the culture that we get from Ghana, and traditions was passed on to us as we grew up in Tottenham.

[02:35]

*OK. So, tell us a little bit about your parents, what did they do, and, what was your family life like?*

Sure. So, so my mum was originally a nursery nurse. She worked in the industry for, almost 20 years before going off to Ghana to start a nursery herself. My dad in the early years actually, was working at McDonald's, very humble beginning at first, and I remember him bringing home Happy Meal toys, and that being the kind of toys I was playing with in my, in my youth, before he transferred himself into, into the minicabbing industry. And eventually working with Addison Lee. And one of the, the core lessons I got from his life actually, was that, regardless of what we do in life, and what career we get into, we're always in the relationship-building business, and, he made me realise the power of relationships from a young age, and he really opened up my mind to think beyond the borders of where I grew up. Because he would tell me stories about some of his, his clients that he used to take on minicab journeys, like, Mr Naymaster who was an Asian doctor, or, Freddie who was his boss, and was a gay woman, or, you know, like, I went on work experience with one of his clients called Ray Goodchild, who owned Goodchild Architects, architecture, out in, in Finchley, and his wife was a transcriber. And I would learn all of these stories of different people who grew up in different walks of life, and it really just diversified the way I thought, and, and heightened my aspirations from a young age.

[04:00]

*OK. And your family life was, was happy by the sounds of, was it?*

Yeah. Yeah, I was very fortunate to grow up with both my parents. I have two siblings that I grew up with as well, younger brother Daniel and an elder brother Kwabena. So, yeah, grew up really enjoying family life actually and growing up with my family. Very fond memories.

*And were there any other influences, apart from your father, your parents, in your early life, that you can think of?*

Yes. Yes, of course. There was times, there was...

*In your early life, at the moment, yeah.*

Yes, even in my early life, like, I had an aunt, one of my aunts, my brother's – my dad's cousins, owned a shop in Seven Sisters in Tottenham. So she was the first vivid picture I had of, like, entrepreneurship within my family. And she still runs that shop today, selling a lot of Ghanaian cuisine actually. And, just seeing her along that journey just, again, heightened my aspirations, and it was just, introduced me I guess into my first steps into entrepreneurship or what it means to be an entrepreneur.

*OK.*

And it's really interesting, because nowadays a lot of people associate with technology and, and VC and investment, when, like, your bakery or your florist, and, all of these local businesses, are equally entrepreneurs as well.

[05:10]

*Mm. OK. You went to a Catholic boys' school, didn't you, when you were young?*

I did. I did.

*Is your family quite religious? Is that, is that why you...*

Yes. Yes, so, so faith played a big part in my journey, and, and I've always believed in, in God, and a creator, and, and life beyond Earth I guess. And my mum was a, was a big advocate. She was a Christian growing up, and really got us into kind of like, learning the Bible and, and Christian schools. So I went to a Catholic, Roman Catholic primary school. I then progressed to a Jesuit college for, for my secondary school, called St Ignatius College, which was an interesting experience, singing in Latin and learning Latin. But a lot of these helped mould, and, and influence my thoughts on, on theology, which is what I went to study actually in college subsequent to that, and how I think about spirituality in general.

*Mm. Yes. You did theology and sociology and history, sort of, humanistic subjects, at your sixth form college, didn't you?*

Yeah. Yeah, I was, I was always...

*Tell us a little bit about, what that college was.*

Yeah. So I went to, to a college called LaSWAP, which was a consortium of four different sixth forms. La Sainte Union, Acland Burghley, Parliament Hill. Oh, and I can't remember the fourth. But, I chose, as you mentioned rightly, sort of, very humanistic subjects, because, I was always fascinated in, in relationships, and our relationship with history, and our relationship with each other as humans throughout history. Because, even at an early age, as I mentioned with my father, I just noticed that kind of relationships was, was such an important currency in a tapestry of how we have evolved as people, and how actually our lives across, whether it's spirituality, business, food, and how we enjoy each other's time, across social media, across physically getting into space together. Like, how that's changed over time, and what's really influenced that. So studying sociology, history, and, oh, what was the last thing I studied? Sociology, history...

*Theology.*

And... Theology. There we go. It really helped me, helped me connect the dots, and make sense of a lot of how we navigate the world as humans.

*Mm. And did, did computing or technology feature at all in your school education?*

Not, not really until, until I reached university. But there was, there was inklings of interest, and I knew that I was, I was intrigued from a young age, because, you know, I don't tell this story very much, but, growing up, my brothers and I used to break into a technology centre after school sometimes in order to play, basically, on their computers, and, because we couldn't afford a computer at home. And we used to play on, like, what we called SNES emulators, and Nintendo SNES was a console, and there was emulators that you could play on a PC. And, we were that eager to engage with technology, and play those games, that we were willing to probably go a stretch beyond what we should have at a young age in order to engage with that technology. And from that curiosity actually, my parents, probably didn't know that I was doing that, but, they bought us our first computer, at home, and, my brothers and I were always on that computer, just really intrigued with the Internet. And now there's access to information that we had across the Web, and how can we navigate that from chat rooms through to learning new things on, like, encyclopaedias when we were moving away from like, *Britannica*, and have physical encyclopaedias, to Wikipedia, which became a phenomenon as we were growing up.

*Yes.*

So this access to information was, was really interesting for us, and, actually, it changed the nature of how we spent time at home, and time in places such as the library, as a result of that.

[08:55]

*Yes. And what was your relationship like with your teachers and tutors at school?*

Always very positive. Always very positive. I have very fond memories actually of a lot of teachers when growing up, who really encouraged me in my journey, and, and really installed a sense of belief in me. And, it got to a stage actually in my career

where, at a time I had imposter syndrome, because I felt like, if I wasn't getting the A grades, or if I didn't go to Oxford or Cambridge, then, maybe I'm not intelligent enough to do a certain job, or to, to go for a certain opportunity. And, I'm happy to say, early on in my career I, I broke down and, and demystified that myth, which is a myth, and, it's only through working with people who went to Oxford and Cambridge, working with people who were getting those grades, that I realised that, intelligence is, is more than just your qualifications or the institution you, you go to.

[09:50]

*Yes. Absolutely. You actually went to Brunel University, didn't you?*

Yes. Yes I did.

*And, tell us a little bit about that, what you studied there.*

Yes. So, so firstly, actually one of my fondest tutors at Brunel University was an elderly chap called Adrian Woods, and, and I just loved the sense of, of belief he had in me, but also the way he had, the way he, his kind of methods of teaching entrepreneurship as a module. So I studied accounting and business management as my degree, a four-year degree, which included a sandwich course, which meant I had a year in industry, where I could go and get experience. But as part of that degree, there was an entrepreneurship module, or element, which was taught by Adrian Woods. And, I really excelled at that module. I got an A in that module, and I was, I was like, top of class within that module. And I, I launched a project called Saffirm with a friend of mine called Denis, and Abdul, where we're teaching employability and entrepreneurship skills to other people in colleges or at universities. And it all came and stemmed from, from studying that module at that university.

[10:54]

And, one of the pivotal moments for me at Brunel was when I went on placement into industry. I worked at a company called ICAP, who are an inter-dealer brokerage, which basically meant that they were a stockbroking firm between the investment banks, and, it was formed by, founded by a guy called Michael Spencer. And, and at the time I worked within their group accounting division. So, I, I became aware of what it meant to work as an accountant in industry, but I quickly realised that, due to

the kind of like, routine nature of the work, I didn't enjoy the work as much as I thought I would in practice, and it showed the importance of getting practical experience, to really validate the theoretical experience that you get on your course. And university doesn't fully prepare you for that. I think you need to get some sort of practical experience, which is why the sandwich course was a blessing in disguise. But it also exposed me to this curiosity, and a seed that was sown around travelling. Because, whilst I worked there I realised that a lot of my peers had travelled on really interesting adventures, and had gone backpacking to really interesting places, and until then, the only country that I had travelled to was Ghana, my country of origin. So it sowed the seed into me into, into starting to travel, and, and off the back of that experience, I went on a three-month backpacking experience across Latin America, subsequent to, to that.

[12:17]

*Fantastic. And you've carried on travelling since haven't you I think.*

Of course. Of course.

*Yeah, yeah yeah.*

I've been to, to, I think I've worked and travelled in, in almost 60 countries now.

*Oh OK. Wow.*

So, I've been quite fortunate across my career to work quite, quite extensively through South Africa, Namibia, Botswana, Uganda, Kenya, Italy, Germany, across the US.

*And do you find that travel, I mean, helps... I mean, they say travel broadens the mind, don't they. So...*

It absolutely does.

*So, do you... You get different perspectives. Do you find that when you...?*

A hundred per cent. A hundred per cent. Like, as I, as I was working across Africa for example, I became really empathetic into, into, especially South Africa, apartheid, and what post-apartheid felt like actually in South Africa, and, even for a business context, like, 80 per cent of Africa was unbanked, and you just don't get that perspective, living in the Western world, like living in the UK for example, or... And when I went to China, I went to Shenzhen, to do some customer testing with customers out there, and, the experience of mobile applications was so different to the West, because, they didn't allow for Google or Facebook, Instagram, and all of these platforms, Twitter, to be, to be in China. So they built versions of these platforms themselves, which meant the native behaviours with technology was just different. So, even in trying to transport Western technology to China, what I quickly realised was that, we need to build it from the bottom up with Chinese influence, because the way of doing business here is just different.

*Mm. Mm.*

So travelling heavily influences, kind of, how I think about navigating the world actually beyond even business.

[13:50]

*Mm. Mm. OK. Great. Having, having... I mean having studied business and management accounting at university, you then... I mean, you... How important was that as a subject choice to your later career, do you think? Or was it...*

I think it laid great foundations. I think accounting is one of those disciplines that really get you to understand how a company fits together numerically, in terms of financially. What does it mean to have revenue? What does it mean to have cost of goods sold? What does it mean to have a profit? How can you actually flex that profit margin? Is it by reducing costs, by increasing revenue? So it got me to understand the fundamentals of how a business works. And my first career outside of uni, which is probably a question you're going to come on to, was at Ernst & Young, and, and was in management consulting, similar to yourself, because I know you are, you are an alumni also from Ernst & Young, and you were also in management

consulting. But, but accounting laid a great foundation for me for that consulting career.

[14:56]

*Mm. Mm, well, just tell... I was going to come on to that next actually, as you mention it. [both laugh] So tell us a little bit about that. I mean, you were there for a couple of years, weren't you?*

Yeah. Yeah. So...

*And, I mean, was that as a graduate entrant to Ernst & Young?*

Yes. So, I was fortunate actually, I had deferred entry, so, I had a job there, but the job started a year later.

*OK.*

So that's, in the period of, of that job starting later, I did a few temporary accounting experiences in companies, to basically save up some money, and that's when I went backpacking for three months, across Latin America. And, something that I didn't speak about before was that, I started to build relationships when I was on my placement year in industry from university, and, I was networking a lot with other people that worked in different companies, and learning from their perspective as to what they did at those companies. So I was starting to learn about what different roles were within different companies, which was really important in informing and helping me come to an informed decision around what I want to go into as a career.

*Mm.*

And one of the individuals I met was a guy called Francis Mayhew. And at the time, he had worked in like, transactional services and private equity, and he was at, I think, Merrill Lynch? Or, JP Morgan maybe. Merrill Lynch. But previously, before that, he was at EY. And, he introduced me to two people that worked at EY, and I believe three people that used to work at EY. So, I was so well informed going into that

interview process that, honestly, it was quite easy for me, as a result, because I had that advantage of speaking to people. And it taught me then that, actually, it makes such a difference when you can democratise access and opportunity. Because, I probably would not have got that job if not speaking to those five people, but through speaking to those five people, I was able to get a job.

*Mm.*

So networks and relationships are so important.

*Mm.*

And, and sadly, some people just don't have access, are not privy to that access, to those networks and relationships, and therefore are unable to break into certain careers because of it.

*Yeah, that's a fantastic tip for any, any of our younger listeners who are...*

Of course.

[16:56]

*...is to, is to try and build that experience. But how did you find it, once you were on the... I... Well I don't know whether it's the right word, but, treadmill, within, within Ernst & Young, was that...*

It's a fitting word. That's a fitting word. So, so I joined as part of what they called their graduate advisory programme at the time.

*Yes.*

And it was like a, a two-year experience where, you are supposed to traditionally rotate across different departments within consulting. So you may have joined the customer team, or the strategy team, or the HR team, or, the transformation and IT team, or the process team. But unlike the other 100-odd graduates that joined at EY,

for better or for worse, I kind of got divided and siloed into a different team, which was called the New Markets team, and the primary goal of that team was to, basically, break into new markets, break into new clients, like FTSE 250 clients. And, I worked with a lady called Isabelle Bailey, who was a director, who was going for partnership, and at first, I really disliked going into work, and I felt like it was such a harsh experience, working one-on-one with a director, who would literally turn my PowerPoints into greyscale, to notice if I've got alignment issues around what I've displayed on a screen. But, there was a real, I guess, inflexion point in our relationship when, she took me to a partner conference at EY in Italy. And at this conference were, talking about our capabilities within advisory and operating models. And, I just gained such a confidence and self-esteem boost in talking to the partners, and actually realising that, they're no different from me. They're just humans. Like, there is no hierarchy, it's all flat, everyone was treated with the same respect I was treating them. And again, it democratised and broke down these initial views that I had of partners as being really senior and hard to reach and hard to communicate to, to actually, they're really reachable, and they're human. But also, she came on that trip with her husband and her daughter, so, immediately, I got to know her personally. So when we got back to work, I reframed how I viewed our relationship, and I started seeing it as such a learning and growth opportunity, working with her. And, as a consequence to that, the other graduates that joined our team, I was almost like, managing them, or influencing them, because I had so much skin in the game with her.

*Mm.*

And as a result, she became a partner at EY, and, and I went on to have a really good reputation, because of the work that I had done with her. And, I then went on to work on a new ventures team, and again, like, looking back on my career today, I realise it now, that I've always been a business builder, and I've always been a builder of relationships, and building winning relationships. And, it started actually at EY when I started noticing that. Because, I was in a new markets team, then a new ventures team, all about building new business for EY.

*Mm.*

And then throughout my career, which we'll touch on in the rest of this interview, I went on to build businesses again and again and again, either for myself or for other corporates.

*Mm.*

And I went on to build winning relationships again and again and again. And it's probably something that I'm going to see myself continuing to do into the future.

[20:00]

*Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Well, I mean... And you, you did a, a CIMA business foundation certificate, is that... So is that related to, is that some sort of formal qualification around this, this sort of a...?*

Precisely. So, so as part of the advisory programme at EY, it's mandatory that all graduates gain at least CIMA, which is an accounting qualification, I believe it's the Chartered Institute of Management Accounting. All management consultants had to do at least foundation level exams for the CIMA, which I fortunately passed, and was exempt from some because of my accountant degree. But if you were in other services such as audit or in tax, you would have had to go the full way to finishing your exams, whereas in management consulting, that isn't the case.

[20:42]

*Yes. Yeah. And of course, while you were at Ernst & Young, you, you had a passion project on the side, didn't you?*

I did. I did indeed. So...

*Tell us about that.*

Of course. My pleasure. My brother and a few friends of mine, so my brother Kwabena and a few friends of mine, had this novel idea where, we're experiencing this pain point around the fact that we love UK hip-hop and grime music. I'm not

sure if you know what this music is Ian. I'm not going to ask you and expose you in this podcast. But, we love this music by artists such as Skepta, Dizee Rascal, Tinie Tempah. Ed Sheeran, you know, like, all of these up-and-coming urban acts, but it was really fragmented when trying to find this music online. So, you would have to go onto, like, a dodgy pirate radio set, or, to a, a small little forum, or, a disparate website that's not very well maintained. And you'd literally have to turn to hundreds of different sources to consume this music. So we set out with the simple goal of creating a central location where you can listen to this music. And before we knew it, what turned from a hobby and a passion project, turned into 70,000 registered users, and suddenly we had an audience that we had to serve. And there was a long tail of, of artists that just wanted to keep on uploading music to our platform. And at the time I read a book that really influenced my thinking by an author called Chris Anderson, he was an editor at *Wired* magazine. And the book was called *The Long Tail*. And it talks about business models such as Amazon, everything store where, there's always going to be a long tail of people who want to create music. And there's always going to be at the end of that, that tail, or at the beginning of that tail, very popular artists that people want to listen to. So that influenced our business model, because now we allowed for that music to be uploaded for free, from artists that everyone knew, and then the long tail of emerging acts would pay for us to distribute their music. So through discovering, through coming onto our platform to listen to these more well-known acts, such as Skepta and Dizee Rascal, you then discover some of the long tail of acts that we have on our platform. So they were getting a lot of exposure and distribution from being on our platform as a result.

*So that was where the monetisation, that the platform came in, is it, from...?*

And that's where the monetisation came in. Initially.

*Yeah, from these people paying to...*

Absolutely.

*...to be on the platform.*

Absolutely. And then we grew across platforms such as YouTube, Instagram now, Spotify, and SoundCloud, so that additional revenue streams opened up as a result of that from both advertising as well as subscription fees.

*OK. Oh right, so... So, how does that work then, in relation to something like Spotify, which is like, a well-known streaming platform?*

Yeah yeah. So, so for Spotify for example, if you put on content that you own, you get revenue dependent on how many people listen to your music. On YouTube it's the same. If you have a high number of viewers, as well as a strong subscriber base, then you get paid revenue based on how many people have viewed.

*OK.*

SoundCloud works in a similar way but not as robust. Instagram's more around influence and reach, but then, you can have people that want to advertise on your platform, and you can say, we can push your advert through our Instagram, through our, through our social following, through our YouTube, through our Spotify, because now you have all of these channels where you have a significant audience.

[24:06]

*You're no longer involved with Mixtape Madness, but...*

Not on a day-to-day.

*Not on a day-to-day.*

Still a board member, but, not on a day-to-day basis.

*Yes. OK. OK. But it's still going?*

It's still going, yes. Yes.

*It's still making money?*

Yeah, the leadership's still making money.

*Good.*

Kingsley, Eddie, and my brother Kwabena, still, still pushing it forwards today.

[24:26]

*OK. OK. And, I guess the experience of setting up that service product if you like, is that what inspired you to get involved in product management as a sort of, career option really?*

Yeah. It's a great question, it's a great question. I think there's a number of contributing factors. One is that Mixtape Madness experience of course where I got to feed my curiosity and actually build technology. Another is that I really want to learn best practice, and learn, like, what were successful technology companies doing to build technology and software. And, whilst I was working at Elixirr, which was a small management consultancy, a smaller version of EY, a lot of that work saw me working across Africa, so, significantly in South Africa, but also in Botswana, Namibia, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, and, and for the second year of that work, I went to Silicon Valley and to San Francisco, and I went with a single partner, with the sole mission to build a new business. And that business was through networking with some of the leading venture capital firms out there, such as Andreessen Horowitz, Sequoia Capital, Greylock Partners, and Lightspeed Ventures. And these are companies, when you think back, that invested into the Googles, the YouTubes, and all of the software that we know today, Facebooks, Snapchats. So they're really prominent names in the VC industry. When I say VC, I'm talking about venture capital. So, I was leaning almost like, a, a fast-track MBA, from being at the table of investors of such credible companies. And, again, through being exposed to a lot of the founders across their portfolio, I, I started learning what the role of product management was within a company, and I started learning actually, looking back, that a lot of what I was doing in Mixtape Madness was product management. So, it started to really synthesise a lot of my learnings in a way that I understood.

*Mm.*

And, off the back of understanding that, I came back to London, and I joined a start-up called WorldFirst. And, and I became essentially one of their first product managers.

[26:35]

*Mm. OK. So, you left E&Y... I mean, was... What was the attraction of going to Elixirr?*

Yeah, sure, that's a great question. So, at the time at EY, I had the opportunity to get promoted into a certain service line, and the service line I was getting promoted into at the time was, like, big energy and, and companies such as Network Rail, and infrastructure companies. And, for me, it just wasn't a fast enough learning experience, and there wasn't that inflection point of passion and interest. So I just knew that I could do a great job, and I could probably stay at EY for fifteen to 20 years and make a decent amount of money and be financially OK, but I wouldn't be, I wouldn't be of service to others, and I wouldn't be doing work that I truly enjoyed. I wouldn't be bringing my best to work. So, I decided at that point I wanted to move to a, a smaller company where there was a bit more risk and a big more skin in the game so that I could get some more ownership and responsibility at a younger age, which is why I joined Elixirr. And they had these, almost like these first, first sprouts of entrepreneurship. Like, it was still a company with only like, 25 to 50 people. They had something called Elixirr Capital, where they were starting to invest into companies themselves. They had Elixirr Foundation, which was all around, kind of, giving back. And there was all these opportunities for me to serve different interests of mine, whilst being at Elixirr.

*Mm.*

And one of them for example was travelling. And Elixirr enabled me to travel a lot broader.

[28:04]

*And you set up innovation hubs, didn't you, in a few places?*

Yeah. Yeah, so...

*So what... Just tell us what they were and how they worked.*

Yeah. So, so as I explained a little, a little bit earlier, myself and a single partner called Brandon basically went on a mission to San Francisco to set up our, almost like our strategic outpost, all right, innovation hub, out in San Francisco. So we really started building relations with VCs and start-ups out there, and connecting a lot of the start-ups to our corporate clients across Africa and the UK. So they would essentially fly out, sometimes to the Valley, get like, a week-long immersion experience, and get talks from the VCs, and from start-ups that are working on software that helped to solve some of the strategic challenges that they were facing. And then, essentially they will procure services from these start-ups as a result of that engagement. And then we started building up more of a, a network and an innovation hub also in London, and in Tel Aviv, in Israel, and connecting a lot of start-ups with each of those ecosystems to our corporate clients, to help our corporate clients think and operate in more innovative ways.

[29:10]

*OK. So, you... You kind of, the principles of product management, I think, around... Well, you, you developed those around about this time, didn't you? I mean, I don't know what... Sorry, I don't know whether these were your principles, or whether they were established principles, but around hypothesis...*

Mm.

*...customer-centricity, and the data, data-informed approach. What...*

So... One of the...

*Tell us a bit about that.*

Sure.

*And how, how did that differ from a product approach that had gone on, that was established previously?*

Sure. Sure. So what Elixirr gave me actually was more the lexicon and the language to understand what VC and start-ups actually mean in practice, to understand what product management was. But in terms of methodology around taking a scientific and artistic approach to hypothesis testing, like testing with customers early and often, doing the discovery work to figure out what the right thing is to build, to work with developers to actually build the thing right, like, a lot of that actually came from my experience working at WorldFirst. Because it's during that experience at World First where, essentially I joined as a business analyst, to really build a lot of relations across the business, understand how it worked, and then, I became one of the first product managers when I, I helped to hire in my boss, a guy called Marc Abraham, who was an experienced product manager and had done that role at several companies beforehand, to really learn the methodology of, like, the role of a product manager and the value add in basically building products that customers love, and lowering the risk, or reducing, or eliminating the risk, or building something that nobody wants.

[30:53]

*Mm. And this is, this a sort of, tech project manager specifically, isn't it?*

Absolutely.

*Because product manager, product management, in a sort of wider sense of the word, has been going on for years. You know, if it's a...*

Yeah.

*If it's a packet of soap powder, then...*

Yeah. So...

*...it's a different, different...*

I would love...

*I'm sure it's totally different to doing it in tech.*

No, I'd love to talk about the history of that, because, it often gets so misinterpreted, because, product management in software has only really been popularised maybe in the last fifteen to 20 years.

*Yeah. Yeah.*

So it's still relatively new. And, you know, if you go to a bank for example, they would have products managers that, or people they call products managers who would manage the credit card products, the mortgage products, the overdraft product, their current account product. In the same way, if you go to P&G, you have someone that manages the soap product, or the detergent product.

*Yes.*

And if we look historically at where that's come from, P&G actually, around, in the 1930s, had, I think it was Neil McElroy who joined P&G, and realised that, when he was managing a soap brand there, I think it was Camay soap, he realised that, he needed to differentiate his approach in how to build, in how to create this product experience. And, he wanted to solve problems that sales and marketing were facing. So, he became the first P&G brand man. And as a brand man, he was interacting with customers to inform what he was then building into the product.

*Yes.*

So that was our first iteration of what product managers were. But then, in the 1980s, before I was born, we had, what's his name, Scott Cook. He was a co-founder of Intuit, and he was a product man originally from P&G. So he came from that ilk and

that, that lineage at P&G, to understand how to build products that are customer-informed.

*Yes.*

But he went on to start his own start-up called Intuit, and their first product was Quicken, and it was a counting software. And, he, he revolutionised the way we think about customer-centricity when he developed something called the Follow Me Home programme. And what he did is, he would literally go to the homes of small business owners and understood, and look, and observe, and take diary studies of, writing down how they currently do accounting, how unholy is this work around, how terrible is this experience, how many steps has it taken them to get a certain job done as an accountant, when, doing their accounts? And through that Follow Me Home approach, which we call today observational studies, or diary studies, he basically informed how he created that first product, which was called Quicken.

[33:25]

And then companies such as Microsoft started popularising this whole thing as programme managers, initially, before we called it product managers, when a programme manager was this person, I was able to translate these technical user requirements that engineers were serving for the product, with actual user requirements that came from the customers. And they were playing this role as translator between tech and with the customer. And what we have today as a product manager is someone that, if you imagine a Venn diagram of user experience and customer, technology and engineers, and the rest of the business, a product manager sits at that intersection facilitating the stakeholder relations between the three. So you would get those, those customer needs and understand those customer problems from your actual users. But then you need to understand the technical feasibility of what we're able to build, like, does it require machine learning, and we don't have that capability in-house? So you need to understand the technical feasibility. But then you understand from the rest of the business things such as, the business viability, such as compliance. Is this something that we could do from a regulatory standpoint, or, is it something that we could support from a customer support standpoint? Do we have the capacity? Is it something that we need to train our sales team in order to sell

it? So this product manager will work as this facilitator between your customer, technology team, and the rest of the business. And that's where we are today.

[34:50]

*So there's quite a lot of, there's a sort of, lineage and background there to product management, which comes from other, other types of product.*

Absolutely.

*What did... Is there anything significantly different about tech, or, you know, in the sense of, websites, web services and so on, which changes anything in that tradition that you have to think about, which you didn't have to think about before with those other things?*

Yes. So, so one of the, one of the more significant things is, around the cost of building something that nobody wants. So traditionally, when managing a product, or an IT project, we used to use a methodology called waterfall, where it was very sequential. You have to do A before you can do B. Once you've done B, then you move on to C. And if we imagine it is, you know, I see IT as, as the division of an organisation that's managed by your chief information officer, your CIO. And it's things like, we need to integrate into this help desk provider, such as Zendesk, in order for our customer support team to manage help desk tickets, OK? And the key thing to remember is that, if help desk goes down, the customer is not necessarily impacted from doing the core job that they are trying to do with your software. So if, on a payments technology like TransferWise, if, if help desk goes down, if Zendesk goes down, my help desk software, I can still make a payment to my friends and family abroad. So actually, that isn't managed by a product manager. That can be managed by a project manager, because if that goes down, it doesn't influence our customer. However, with products, once they go down, they will impact our customers directly. So we have two types of products, we have customer-enabled products, which are things like back end APIs. So, I can have a payments API at TransferWise, and if that payments API goes down, I can no longer transfer money to my mum in Ghana. So that should be the manager of the product. And also have customer facing products, such as my mobile app, or my web application, or my, my,

yeah, or my mobile app or my web application. So, if the TransferWise app goes down, I can no longer make payments to my mum, because that app is now down. So they get managed as products.

*Mm.*

And the key difference between managing that as a product in an agile environment versus a projects manager in a waterfall environment, is that we want to iterate early and often, and release value incrementally, so that we're, we're lowering the cost and the risk of building something that nobody wants. And the risk of taking a waterfall approach is that I might spend nine months thinking that I'm building something for a customer, but really just going over-indexing on my own idea, and spend maybe £1.5 million doing so, and nobody wants it. And that's a very expensive cost to pay, when I could be iterating and releasing products every two weeks and making updates every two weeks or every month. And that's a much quicker feedback loop to understand if I'm on the right track in building something that a customer loves.

[37:47]

*Mm. OK. How do you get that feedback?*

Various different...

*Quickly. [laughs]*

Various different methods. So, for example, you could do something as simple as customer interviews, where, you know, you reach out to five to ten customers to understand through having a conversation, actually feedback, what we call evaluative research on how they, how do you evaluate the product that you put out there that you want feedback on. There's also generative research with an interview, to understand, what is the make-up of this persona or this person that I'm speaking to? Are they female, are they male? If I was building a payments product, how frequently do they make payments? Things such as that. So one method is through doing customer interviews. But then there's a range of what we call minimal viable products, and these are different methods of testing with customers early and often, and one of the

main tools we use is something called a prototype, which is not a product, but is like, an early version of that idea, that you just want to put out there to get feedback on. So an example of a prototype could be, a landing page. So I can have a landing page online to test out whether, let's say, certain language, does this value proposition resonate with my customer or not? And I may do something like an A/B test, where I may have two different versions of the same landing page, and dependent on how you found the landing page will depend on what you see.

*Mm.*

But really I just want to get feedback on whether this resonates with my customer audience or not.

*Mm.*

And there's a few other different methods like that, that you could do to just test early and often with customers, and get a feedback.

[39:18]

*OK. OK. I wanted to ask you, I mean, I think you, when you were at WorldFirst, you, you... Did you build the product management team there? I think, is that right?*

I helped to build it. Not single-handedly, of course.

*No, OK. Yeah yeah. OK. But...*

But I was part of, of a wider team.

*What did you look for in, in a, in a... What do you look for in a good product manager?*

It's a great question. So, it's a great question, because, there was a report released this year, the 2019 Product Management Insights report. And, this was a report, a survey done across hundreds of product managers as to what their backgrounds were to break

into product management. And only eight per cent of product managers started off their career as product managers. And what we found was, 26 per cent were software engineers, 24 per cent were business analysts, and, those two are really interesting, because those are roles that traditionally work quite closely with product managers, and therefore have empathy and understanding as to what it is to be on the other side of, of working with a product manager within a product team. So it makes sense why they were two of the roles seen as like, the more popular entry routes in. But across that survey, actually, the third was, was like, the option was 'other', in terms of, there are so many other routes in. There's people that were marketing, there were people that were in sales, there were people that were in research. And that's because, the core competence is really around relationship building, and communication. Whether it's communicating with your stakeholders across your company, or with the customer, or with your technologists, a lot of it is around, how we communicate, and who we communicate with. And there's various tools as a product manager you use to, to do that communication, such as a road map, which illustrates the plan of work that we're looking to work on and why, you know. Or, through emails. There's a ton of emails you're going to be managing as a products manager. Or meetings. There's a ton of meetings and workshops.

*I read some of your stuff online though, and you're not a big fan of road maps are you?*

I... So...

*You, you do... [laughs] You do them down a bit I think.*

I'm happy you've done some homework and some research. [both laugh] So, I'm not a big fan of feature-led road maps, where people are saying that, 'I want to build this feature.' Because, when you're being customer-led and customer-centric, you're really trying to prioritise problem solving for the customer, and part of the product discovery and testing for your customer is, to figure out what that feature will be.

*Mm.*

So you cannot prioritise a feature on a road map when you haven't figured out whether that's a feature that resonates with the customer. What you've got to prioritise are these goals, or these problems to solve, and put some key metrics around it to say, actually, this is the way that we can measure, that we found something that really resonates with our customer. So I'd rather have a road map that's goal-orientated, with measurable measures of success, or key metrics, and even some dependencies to say like, I cannot complete this unless I speak to compliance, because it needs to be compliant, because it's to do with money, for example. So yeah.

[42:08]

Another thing that we, I look for in product managers are, people that are curious. Because, curiosity, about, ask questions that lead to the root cause of a problem, but also people that are really self-directed in their learnings. So one of the questions I ask often is, like, 'Who are opinion leaders that you read books about in this space, or read blogs about, or you subscribe to their newsletters, or you watch videos, or you listen to a podcast?' Because I want to get a feel for how enthusiastic they are about product management versus just another job. Because you're willing to go a bit further when you're a bit more passionate and have more skin in the game.

[42:40]

*Yeah yeah. Yes. OK. So, at WorldFirst, what was your proudest achievement?*

It's a great question. So, one of my proudest achievements actually is that I worked within a mobile team, and, as my first time working obviously on a mobile product, and, working within that team, I have two really proud achievements actually. Working within that team, I had to go on this change management journey, and one of the hardest things of working with people is, changing mindsets, and sometimes legacy mindsets and legacy ways of working. And, I had a lot of empathy for the existing workers within that team, because, previously they had not worked with product managers, and they had not worked in that agile fashion that I was introducing. So part of gaining trust with other stakeholders is, sometimes, doing things in a more collaborative way and over-communicating and over-involving people in co-creating solutions, so that they play a part and feel invested into the ideas that you are creating. So I was over-indexing on basically bringing people on board with that journey. And what I was proud of was, when I got to the end of that

journey, they understood why it was important to, to prioritise customer problems. They understood how and why we prioritise certain problems over another. They understood and had empathy for making tough trade-off decisions as a product manager, because, you can only do so much work in a certain time period. So you're going to have to sacrifice certain things that cannot be done in that period.

*Mm.*

[44:05]

And the other thing that I was really proud of was, when we went to Hong Kong, I worked very closely with an awesome product manager called Becker, and, we did this observational study on how Chinese users are onboarded. And we recorded, the registration page take literally, nearly two minutes to load up in China. And we came back and played that for senior stakeholders to see how painful that experience was. And it's in that moment that it taught me that, it's so powerful to have the voice of the customer directly feeding back into leadership. So if I could ever get senior stakeholders in the room for customer testing, or play back a recording, I would, because that always spoke volumes in terms of changing their mindsets and getting them on board, because they heard it from a customer, and not third party through myself or from customer services or sales.

[44:52]

*Mm. And one of these mobile products, as I understand it, an Android app, the...?*

Yes, an Android app, the...

*...to increase the user, the monthly average users, or...*

Yeah.

*...by an incredible amount in a very short space of time.*

Yeah, yeah. So...

*So, so obviously these techniques worked.*

Yes, of course. And, so, with both the Android app and the iOS app. And, I guess just to, to play down a little bit, the apps were not hugely popular on the App Store. So we kind of decommissioned them, and started again from first principles, to get a core job and core experience as great as possible, so people would be able to transfer money through their mobile, mobile phones basically. So we saw an increase in terms of moderately active users up to around 3,000 per cent month for month in the following three months, whilst we launched that app, because, we were finally delivering and solving the problems that customers were screaming out and sharing with us.

[45:47]

*Mm. Mm. OK. So, 2018, that was only, that was only last year... [laughs]*

Yes. Not so long ago.

*You, you left WorldFirst, and, as I understand it, you had a product idea of your own or something which you wanted to develop. And you, you got involved in Entrepreneur First?*

Yes.

*To try and develop that yourself. Was...*

A lot of companies that begin with, end in the word First.

*Tell us a bit about that.*

Sure. So, so WorldFirst actually subsequently got acquired by Ant Financial, who are part of the Alibaba Group for \$700 million. And it was great being along that journey and taking my lessons learnt. And...

*So it was actually bought by the Chinese in fact.*

It was. It was in the end.

*Interesting given what you were saying. Yes.*

Absolutely. Absolutely. And...

*Anyway, sorry, that's a...*

I subsequently went to join Entrepreneur First, which is one of Europe's leading accelerator programmes. The unique thing about their programme is that you come in as an individual, without your team, and just your idea, and hopefully you have the opportunity to meet a co-founder along that programme, and then they will fund you and get you to a certain stage with your idea. And... And I had an idea going in there around, rethinking recruitment experiences, because, a lot of the Gen Z and, and Millennials were growing up with these native experiences of mobile which were really mobile-led around like, you know, experiences with Spotify and instantly accessing music, or, on Snapchat and Instagram where they're recording themselves, and speaking through video and audio. So I was thinking of a recruiting platform that was led with that kind of native experience, targeted at, like, students and graduates. But in the end actually, the real benefit of that free market experience was that, I wasn't really passionate about that idea, but I gained a lot of self-awareness around this intersection that I was really passionate around, which was around VC investment, start-ups, and diversity. And, I decided that I wanted to double down and operate within that realm. And that insight was really validated through that experience of Entrepreneur First. And my co-founder really validated through that experience that he really cares about growth frameworks and supporting engineers through growing in their careers. And, he went on to join a company called Monzo, one of the leading free techs here in the UK...

*Oh yeah, yeah yeah.*

...as one of their heads of engineering, in really helping other engineers go along that growth journey. So we've both learnt a lot around ourselves, and what we want to

double down on, based on that experience. So it was really more around career acceleration for me.

[48:29]

*And, that kind of, that kind of motivation, that idea of where you wanted to be, took you to Backstage Capital.*

Absolutely.

*Which kind of, specialises in, as we said earlier, the sort of, under-represented groups who are setting up companies and trying to develop them?*

Precisely. Spot On. You've done a lot of homework, and I appreciate it. So, the unique thing again is that, I want to come back relationships, right. So, I was blogging a lot from my time at Elixirr through to my time at WorldFirst. So for the last five, six years I've been blogging about this intersection of technology, investors and diversity, and telling a lot of stories about, you know, role models that, that a lot of us aspiring black people that want to work in technology just didn't know about, you know, like investors such as Monique Woodard, who used to be at 500 Startups, or Troy Carter, who used to manage Eve, the musician, and Lady Gaga, but went on to become an investor himself. A rapper called Chamillionaire, who equally had, a Grammy-nominated rapper, had investments in technology such as Maker Studios, that was acquired by Disney for almost \$800 million. And Nas for example, a New York rapper, who formed, or founded, the team of QueensBridge Venture Partners who invested in really big and successful software such as Dropbox, Genius, Lyft, and Casper mattresses. So I was telling a lot of these stories in Europe where these stories had just not been told, and really highlighting these role models in technology and in the investment world that people just didn't know about. And one of the ladies that I highlighted through these stories was Arlan Hamilton, who was the founder of Backstage Capital, and she had this incredible story from nothing to something where, you know, she went from being even homeless to get her first cheque for \$25,000, and eventually going on to raise around \$5 million from really notable investors such as Marc Andreessen and Stewart Butterfield, the CTO of Slack, to create Backstage Capital, which invest in under-represented , or what we like to say, underestimated

founders. So people of colour, women and LGBT founders. And that was kind of the start of her journey, and I documented that story through my blogging. And that's how I first encountered Arlan, before going on to interview her for a podcast, which I never brought out, ironically. And then actually, invited her over to the UK and arranged strategic engagements for private and public events to introduce her to the ecosystem before, at one meeting we had at EQT Ventures, she announced at the table that she wanted me to become MD of her European operations. We started this London accelerator programme, and building up the accelerator business from scratch.

[51:11]

*And, you, I don't know how long ago it was, but you had the first cohort of companies under your wing, didn't you?*

Yes. Yes. So I had, I have a terrific team that have worked with me in building this business. A guy called Andy Davis, and a lady called Anisah Osman Britton. And we've had a team of five entrepreneurs we've been fortunate enough to serve and support. One called Afroenchix that provide organic and natural hair, for curly... hair products for curly and kinky hair. And they're selling in shops such as Whole Foods, as well as directly through their website. We have another one called *gal-dem*, which is a digital media publication and editorial magazine written by women and people of colour, but it also works with some fantastic brands. So, a year or two ago they took over, for example, the *Guardian Weekender*, but also done some fantastic work with Nike Run Club, Audible, Levi's, and all these amazing brands, the BBC, Channel 4, the list goes on. We also have Trim-It, which is a really novel idea of basically, bringing mobile services to you. They started off with a mobile barber shop, which you could literally order like Uber on your phone, and a van will pull up with this luxury experience inside a van, where you get this personalised barbering experience. Which is awesome, and which you can subscribe on your app to get a trim a month regardless if you're in work, at a gym, or at home. And now they've just introduced a new vertical of the business, where they do nails for females. So, now they've got a van just driving around London to start off with, that also does women and nails. And I'm really excited with the growth trajectory and possibilities of where that business can really go. We also have another one called Tambua Health, where

they've developed technology very similar to Shazam, where you can literally cough into your smartphone device and it diagnoses you for respiratory diseases such as tuberculosis or pneumonia. Fantastic.

*Just from your cough?*

It's fantastic technology. I'm rally... Like, one of the blessings in disguise of working with founders is that, there're a lot smarter than you are in their specific domains, so you end up learning a lot really fast. And, I've learnt so much from just having these founders around, and, and they're all fantastic in their own different ways.

[53:27]

*So how does it... How does it work at Backstage then? I mean, you, presumably you help them, facilitate them in their product development, do you?*

So we help them... We, we... So the last company, first of all, is Vitae London, which is a watch brand which, for every watch they sell, they help provide education to a child in Africa. And I love that business model, and what they are trying to achieve there. And, what we do is, across a three-mile period, we provide first access to capital, so we actually invest \$100,000 into each of these start-ups..

*Right, yeah, I was going to come to that. You're actually, you actually put money in? Yeah.*

We actually put money in, you are skinning the game. So we... We invest \$100,000 into each of these start-ups. We also provide access to our network, so, access to the Backseat network. So, you know, whether it's to, to VCs because they want to raise additional capital, or to seasoned operators who can help them with something specific, such as their business model or marketing, with product, or with UX, or with finance. We introduce them to operators within our network, sometimes in the form of mentorship, sometimes I'm just helping them with a strategic they are facing. And then finally, it's really around, really being that, that, almost that extension of their business life. Whatever we can help you with, we will help you with. So we used to

run expert workshops as part of the programming to help them with specific domain knowledge such as like, how to get PR and press for example where we would invite external facilitators to run sessions on topics like that. And then finally, we had like, an online curriculum, which was self-directed learning, which they could pursue at any time they want as well.

[55:08]

*OK. OK. So, so these five companies have been through that three-month process.*

Yes.

*They're now, are they now on the road?*

No. So, we're going to continue to support them, but less hands-on. So, you know, they don't have to work in an office space any more. You don't have weekly programming for them any more. But we're still there to help them on their strategic challenges, because, we are there, we are incentivising now we've invested to help them grow.

*Yes.*

And going on that journey.

*OK.*

But to make sure that they, you know maintain a sanity, and think about mental health, and have safe spaces where they can have discussions with us, about how things are going, in good and bad times. And actually, it's in the bad times when it's really telling what kind of relationships you have with your investor. So, that's part and parcel of, of this experience with the cohort.

*Right. OK.*

Yeah. And, and whilst I did that, my equivalents were doing the same thing in Philadelphia, Detroit and in LA. So in total there was about 24 companies and nearly 2.5 million invested across the 24.

[56:04]

*Yes. OK. And you're, I mean, the, as far as Backstage is concerned, presumably at some point, what will you do, sell out from, from that company once it becomes successful, is that the idea?*

So, so the... Yeah, the way venture capital usually works is that, once you make that investment, you know, in a certain timeframe, let's say seven to ten years, that company exits, and when we say exit, we're talking about, like, a liquidation event. So either, you know, they sell onto the public markets, and they may, you know, sell onto the FTSE 250, or the NASDAQ, and therefore, investors make a return based off that sale. Or they may get acquired by another company, and therefore investors may make a return based off that acquisition. So, based off the exit is how, how the investor makes a return.

*Right. OK.*

And then you go into our relationship very transparently about that. Yeah. Which is quite difficult, because as a, as a founder and a business owner, you're trying to be ambitious and grow the biggest business possible.

*Mm.*

But at the same time, there's a, there's maybe a stage in which at which you may not enjoy, or a stage at which you get to where, it makes time to...

*Probably some hard decisions have to be taken along the way sometimes.*

Absolutely. Absolutely. Sometimes you may not be the same founder to, you know, take the company to IPO, or to manage it once it's in the public. It depends on, on where your strengths lie, or what brings you joy in, in doing that.

*And you'll be giving them that honest advice?*

Yeah, but also giving that honest advice to say, you know, we're wanting to build the biggest company possible, so...

*Yeah yeah.*

So, we're not trying to push you to exit too soon. We're not trying to push you to go and float your company. We're pushing you to do what's right for your company, and to continue to enjoy that journey. Because in doing that, you're going to do your best to work.

[57:42]

*OK. Have you got more companies coming through the pipeline now?*

Honestly, always inundated on deal flow. So, we had like, 1,900 applications for our accelerator programme, and we only picked 24, right?

*Right.*

So, we have a demand issue in terms of, we have too many people that look for investment that we can't actually supply to. So that's why it takes an ecosystem. And one of our, our principles is that it take a village, and really we form a strong network style across the ecosystem, to share deal flow, and to share other start-ups and founders that we think are worthwhile meeting, given that they're trying to raise and going along this journey.

*Right.*

We just haven't got the funds to back them ourselves.

*No. Exactly. Presumably you have to be quite... You presumably go through a sort of, an evaluation process for anything you do support.*

Yeah, of course. Absolutely. Even if you do get a qualified lead from whoever the source is, you still have to do your own due diligence and homework to make sure that it's a fair investment for you, and, and your thesis.

[58:41]

*OK. OK. Great. I mean, while you're doing all of this, you're a big blogger, and, you do training and consultancy and other things as well, don't you, on a...*

Yeah. Somehow.

*Is that more on a personal, personal...?*

More on a personal, yeah, yes. So for me, like, my main mission, I guess, and why I feel it's my purpose and calling on this earth is to create more pathways for, like, people from low income backgrounds, from diverse communities, to really break into tech, whether they're investors, founders or talent. So I always try and work on initiatives, organisations, programmes, that help, help achieve that goal. So at the moment for example I've been supporting an organisation called Diversity VC, a non-profit, who have a fantastic programme called Future VC, where they've taken interns from a diverse background you know, in terms of ethnicity, in terms of gender, in terms of, of even age, actually, and provided five-week work experience across different VC firms. So they're actually getting experience that's relative and relevant, and gets put on their CV as well as the relationships, so that they can hopefully break into venture, which is traditionally a very hard industry, unless you have the relationships. So it's an honour to serve on programmes like this. And I held a master class a few weeks ago, and a dinner, to really try and share my story, with a lady called Leila from Kindred Capital, who also did the same, to really encourage these young people, or, these diverse interns, what a career in venture looks like. So I'm always trying to, to give back and create more pathways into technology.

[1:00:15]

*Mm. Mm. OK. And you're a keen member, I think I read, of the, of the Product Tank community.*

Yes. Yes, I love that community.

*What does that mean? Tell us a bit, tell us a bit.*

Yeah. Yeah, so, Mind the Product is a, is a global community that's been running for, I think around twelve years now. But it started off as a meet-up in a pub, with just a few product managers kind of trading notes. But now it's a, it's a monthly event called Product Tank, that's in over 140 cities across the world. So I try and attend the London monthly meet-up as much as possible to, really trade notes with other product managers, stay abreast of the latest learnings within the industry, and, you know, still carrying on and make connections in the industry. And I'm often taking new product managers, or aspiring product managers, along to this community and its events so they can dip their toe in it and, and learn a little bit more about what product management is.

[11:01:07]

*OK. Great, So what do you regard as the biggest success of your career so far?*

That's a challenging question to...

*We go on to these difficult ones now, about, about your, [laughs], reflecting where you are.*

It's a challenging one. One of my proudest moments is seeing how the, the leadership at Mixtape Madness, especially my brother Kwabs, who went from part-time accountant to full-time working in the business, have really grown the business from, I remember like, having £30k in revenue to now over a million in revenue. And to see, to see him go along that journey, and I was very hands-off, like, I was there during the early days, very hands-on in the early days, but to see them go along that journey and build that business, I've been super proud of that.

*Mm. Mm.*

Super proud of that. And, I'm super proud actually of, of just my family in general. My mum became an entrepreneur at the age of 60, and that's when she launched her nursery. So, super encouraged at having that role model around me. My younger brother, again, he has launched his own business called Merge Marketing, where, he provides digital market and services for others. And, and probably more proud of, of my fiancée, and my family, and seeing her go along this journey of personal discovery, and, and being both a mother but also the evolving identity of, you know, she does personal training, and, and, like, how she has evolved and grown as a person. She's been a friend of mine for sixteen years actually, before we got together. So, I guess it's just been a beautiful journey of, of seeing relationships really blossom, you know, and, actually, I'd say more proud in seeing how, how others have grown, and how I can contribute to those journeys.

[1:02:41]

*OK. Yeah. What... I mean, in terms of your career to date, are there any... What were the key decisions that you made along the way which you think have contributed to your success? Maybe... Were there decisions that you... Obviously some good decisions. What were they, and, were there any you regretted later, and, you would have done things differently if you...?*

Yeah, there's a, there's a ton. I'll sum up just a few. One is, I started forming some core principles about my career. One of the... I'll go through two of them, just for, for us. Two of them. So, one was direction over speed. Like, I decided that, it's more important for me to, to dedicate myself to going in the right direction, and staying the course in a certain direction, even if that road is slow, you know, and, I like, I like the analogy of, of being on a train, and stopping often at stops. But I know that if I stay on the Central Line from Epping, it will eventually get to Bank. I've just go to stay the course, because it's going in the right direction, regardless of the speed. Whereas, sometimes we can get fooled into going at speed, but often in the wrong direction, and exerting a lot of energy going in the wrong direction. So I always try and favour direction over speed.

[1:04:00]

Another thing that I favour is on, on dedicating myself to this game of inches. Like, I know that it's a game of cumulative wins, that comes from taking an inch at a time.

So something that I do is, I track my progress through a journal, so I always journal, like, key moments, like this podcast that we're having today, so that I have a track record of key things that matter to me, and I can look back in six months, a year, four years, and look at these patterns of behaviours and where they led to, when I've been following my curiosity.

*OK.*

So, it's one thing to follow your curiosity, but it's another thing to track the results once you start following it. So these are core things that have really guided me along my journey.

[1:04:39]

And a third one came out of an inflection point when my father passed away five, six years ago, where, I said to myself, from now on, in any environment I am in, in or out of work, I'm going to be my most authentic self. And in doing so, I'm going to do my best work. And a result of that has, has absolutely manifested and led me to, to greater opportunities that I could never imagine. Like in April earlier this year, I got invited to, to go on the European arm of the Obama Foundation programme, and, and to, to meet a lot of European leaders in Berlin, and meet President Obama himself. And these are opportunities that I never wrote down as goals, or never could foresee in my life, but, but through doubling down on being my most authentic self, and as a result doing my best work, it's continuing to lead to a lot of these opportunities which are just incredible.

[1:05:32]

*OK. OK. And you obviously bring a lot of passion to that.*

Yeah.

*Through your authenticity comes the passion, I guess, as you said earlier.*

Of course. Of course. And that's why I'm more likely to stay the course, you know.

*Yes.*

And, and why I'm probably well-placed to, to...

*And where do you think that course is going then, say, over the next ten years?*

Well hopefully for me, it's really democratising accessing to technology and venture capital, so that, we're just seeing more representative leadership that looks more like society.

*Mm.*

Because I think, decisions made as an investor are very powerful to the course of the innovations that are created for the rest of the world. You know, if we look at the Facebooks, the Instagrams, WhatsApps, they all took venture capital, early forms of capital in their early days, and I think the people that are shaping the technology that we're building today, should look a lot more like the society that we actually live in. So, I want to really contribute to that story, and, and, in a meaningful way here across UK and Europe, but globally, essentially, you know. And I, I don't really care about accolades or awards or, being known on the surface for it. I don't mind operating in the background and, just doing, doing the hard graft of getting it done.

[1:06:39]

*Mm. OK. What do you think the biggest challenges and opportunities are in tech in the next ten years, talking more generally rather than just...?*

Yeah. I think, one of the biggest challenges is that, as these industries emerge, like, like artificial intelligence, one of the things we need to think about are in, like, the quality of your inputs influences the outputs that you have. And if we have really narrow datasets that are biased by nature, and that's training the machines and the computers, then they're being trained on a very biased dataset, you know, that may exclude, for example, women and gender data, or may exclude people of colour, or minorities. So we really need to influence the inputs that are going into these machines and these algorithms so that the machines are learning from, from data that's representative of society. And we've seen across history actually how the

gender gap has influenced actually, like, how, how society in general, from healthcare through to policies, has been influenced from this lack of data. And, you know, I was, I was given a book from, from a lady I won't mention, because she really wouldn't want me to mention her name publicly, and the book's title was, it's called *Invisible Women*. I've actually got it in my bag right now. And it talks about the history of humanity and how a lack of data on women has actually made it such a patriarchal world, shaped by middle-class white men as a result of it. And there are so many powerful case studies, backed up with evidence and data, that support that case in that book. And it reminded me about how important it is to, to really have evidence and data if you really want to influence change, especially on a policy level with government for example.

*Mm. Mm.*

So it's something that I'm thinking deeply about now.

*Yeah. Yeah. So what you're saying is, there are kind of, could be implicit biases in that data.*

Absolutely. Absolutely.

*Which are just not recognised, and...*

Absolutely, you know.

*Yeah yeah yeah. I can understand that, yes.*

And one of, one of the things that I've learnt, and I can articulate now, is that, one of the blessings in growing up in Tottenham and in north London is that, Haringey is one of the most multicultural wards in the whole of Europe, where over 90 nationalities exist, and over 300 languages are spoken, so, you're pretty much moulded by diversity and inclusion from a young age. And as a result of that, I, I didn't realise that I was, I was understanding intersectionality at a level that a lot of professionals that I've worked with just don't. So I understood actually that the oppressions and the

struggles of, you know, of a working-class Asian lady from Harrow is very different to a middle-class white lady from Chelsea and Kensington. So to have these women that work at work, actually doesn't solve the problem for all. It's actually heavily screwed and shaped by whoever the women are that formed that network. So it got me really thinking about the layers in intersectionality and how, you know, social economic background and class, which can't be seen on the surface, have such influence and such an impact, and effect. And, actually, what's the lived experience of someone that is transgender, and how is their lived experience in this work environment? And, I started building a lot more empathy actually from, for different people, from different backgrounds, and I think, it's something that companies need to do a better job of, of really thinking about in their onboarding experiences when they're taking on new, new people, and new hires, into their organisations. And it's something that our education system needs to do a better job of, of really teaching at a young age, so that we have much more of an appreciation and respect for it in society as we grow.

[1:10:11]

*OK. OK. What... So what advice would you give someone entering the tech business today?*

Try and just be self-directed. Be a continuous learner, and there's lessons to learn everywhere, especially in failure. So, so don't be too harsh on yourself when things don't work out. Try and quickly realise, what did I learn from that experience, and how can I move more intelligently now that I know that?

*Great. Andy, it's been fascinating hearing about your life and career to date. And thank you for giving us an insight into, into the world of tech start-ups and product development.*

No problem. Thank you for having me.

*And, congratulations on your work in promoting entrepreneurship in, across diverse communities.*

Thank you. I appreciate it.

*Thanks, on behalf of Archives of IT, thank you very much for talking to us.*

No, you're very welcome. My pleasure.

*Thanks.*

[End of Interview]